

ETHICAL CHOICES: A CASE FOR NON-CONFLICTING ABSOLUTISM

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I. *Introduction*

Is it ever right to lie to save a life? Are some abortions in extreme cases morally justifiable? Can Christians under totalitarian governments participate in Bible smuggling? These and a host of similar questions may be reduced to one fundamental ethical question: do God's ethical absolutes ever truly conflict? Does the absolute always to speak the truth, for example, sometimes conflict with the absolute always to protect innocent human life? Does the absolute to proclaim the gospel to all people ever actually conflict with the absolute to obey our governmental leaders? If we say that God's absolutes do sometimes conflict, we must somehow choose which divine directive to obey, and we must answer the criticism that God's ethical "absolutes" do not really seem to be absolute. If we say that God's absolutes never actually conflict, then we must be able to explain how and why we would act in each of the above dilemmas, and be able to offer a logically consistent, biblically defensible, and existentially satisfying methodology for making ethical choices when there is an apparent conflict between divine absolutes.

It is the purpose of this study to analyze the problem of ethical choices in cases where there appear to be genuine conflicts between two or more of God's moral norms, and to explain and contend for the position known as non-conflicting absolutism. We will argue that God's absolutes are truly absolute, that is, they are always valid and in force and admit of no exceptions extrinsic to the norms themselves.¹

¹ While we acknowledge the legitimate distinctions frequently made between norms, absolutes, commands, laws, and similar concepts, we are using the terms more

We will likewise maintain that the moral conflicts of life are not genuine conflicts between two divine absolutes, but are only apparent conflicts. We believe that this position is not only biblical, but is rational and genuinely workable in daily living.

Over 20 years ago J. C. Bennett declared: "One of the most debated issues among students of Christian ethics today is the methodological question concerning the relation of the universal or at least broadly based criteria in an ethical judgment to the unique elements in the concrete situation."² While speaking in an era when situation ethics was rapidly emerging as the leading contender among non-evangelical ethical approaches, Bennett was expressing a perennial concern of moral theologians. Whether we use the term situationism, contextualism, or casuistry, or whether we focus upon the use of coercion to suppress heretics or the permissibility of fornication between young lovers, the same question is being asked: how do general moral norms or principles relate to the specific situations of life? And underlying this question is the matter of ethical choice in conflict situations, for it is only in the presence of alternative choices that the applicability of ethical norms or standards becomes problematic. In every ethical decision there is the reality of conflict, either very recognizable and troublesome or more or less latent. In the very nature of the case, however, when there is choice there is conflict between two or more alternatives. While ethics certainly includes far more than making choices, ethics involves continual conflict between what appear to be two or more legitimate and even praiseworthy courses of action.

It is, therefore, not only reasonable but essential to focus on moral conflicts in our attempt to discover an acceptable ethical system. While a surprising number of writers in the field do not seem to consider the problem of conflicts as having much to do with the business of ethics,³ it is in conflict situations that we can best ascertain

or less synonymously, for the purpose of variety and readability. However, when we use these terms, unless we indicate otherwise, we are referring to those obvious moral absolutes which practically all evangelical Christians have traditionally regarded as universally binding, e.g., do not murder, do not commit adultery, give to the poor. We are not referring to the numerous specific applications of these absolutes, which may or may not be universally binding, e.g., never kill anyone, never remarry after a divorce, give a tenth of your income to the poor.

² J. C. Bennett, "Principles and the Context," *Storm Over Ethics* (ed. publisher; n.p.: United Church Press, 1967) 1.

³ It is amazing that C. F. H. Henry's two standard works, the massive *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) and the smaller *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) have no discussion at all of the problem

the validity and workability of an ethical system. H. Thielicke has said it well:

... theological ethics usually makes the mistake of taking the "normal case" as its standard for measuring reality. The result is the illusion that by providing certain Christian directives we have actually solved the problems. In ethics, however, the situation is similar to that in medicine. The problems do not arise with the ordinary cases, but with the borderline cases, those involving transitions or complications. It is the abnormal rather than the normal case which brings us up against the real problems. Hence the real test, even in respect of foundational principles, is whether an ethics has been proved in the crucible of the borderline situation and emerged with even deeper insights.⁴

Some argue that there is never a "right" decision. W. Baker, for example, states:

There is no such thing as a morally defensible position. That is, to be "right" in any ethical situation is impossible. True, we have fallen into the habit of thinking there are "right" and "wrong" positions, and made ourselves feel clean about the first and guilty or inferior about the

of moral conflicts. In the hefty volume of published papers from the recent International Council on Biblical Inerrancy Summit III conference, devoted exclusively to Christian ethics, there is no sustained discussion of ethical conflicts; only N. Geisler's article on the "Sanctity of Human Life" raises the issue (*Applying the Scriptures* [ed. K. S. Kantzer; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987] 139-60).

Fortunately there are exceptions to the general pattern. Some of the most extensive discussions of moral conflicts are to be found in H. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, Vol. I: Foundations* (ed. W. H. Lazareth; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 482-667; R. McCormick and P. Ramsey, eds., *Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations* (Chicago: Loyola University, 1978); N. L. Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), and N. L. Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981). Other helpful, though brief, treatments include E. J. Carnell, *Christian Commitment* (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 223-30; M. J. Erickson, *Relativism in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974) 137-53; S. C. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University, 1982) 154-60.

Of all people, evangelicals ought to pay the most careful attention to the matter of moral conflicts, since we insist so firmly on the inviolability of absolute norms. Non-evangelicals expect us to deal with the problem. Writing in 1976, J. P. Wogaman commented on the "new evangelical perfectionism" that had recently emerged, and discussed J. H. Yoder and J. Ellul as representatives of this position. His lament was that "neither Yoder nor Ellul gives us absolute guidelines for moral judgment in situations where we have to choose between alternative positive strategies of witness and action" (*A Christian Method of Moral Judgment* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976] 35).

⁴ Thielicke, *Foundations*, 578.

second. It's a pretty dangerous system—it's a sickness to feel guilty and, morally speaking, more sick to feel the opposite: justified, righteous, "right."⁵

Contrary to Baker, we will argue that there are "right" choices to be made in the application of moral truth to specific situations. Admittedly these choices are not always easily discerned, and at times total certainty concerning the rightness of a specific choice may not be ours, yet we maintain that there is always a course of action—perhaps more than one—that is ethically "right," that is, it is pleasing to God because it conforms to his righteous character and standards as revealed in the scriptures. The difficulty is, of course, in determining which is a proper course of action. In this paper we will first introduce a number of different ethical approaches to the problem of moral conflicts, then explain, argue for, and defend non-conflicting absolutism. Throughout our study we will attempt to apply this approach to some specific moral conflict situations. It is not within the scope of this article to explain and refute at length alternative positions, but some acquaintance with the other leading viewpoints will be of great value in highlighting the distinguishing features of non-conflicting absolutism.

II. *Ethical Approaches to Conflict Situations*

How do we determine which course of action to take in conflict situations? N. Geisler is one of the few evangelical ethicists dealing systematically with the issue of moral conflicts. He has classified the various ethical alternatives into six basic approaches, and we will use his typology as a convenient outline for summarizing the basic systems before concentrating upon the one we believe is the most viable.⁶ The first three positions are held, for the most part, by non-evangelical Christians, while the latter three are the most common ethical alternatives among evangelical Christians. With each approach the question will be considered: "Is it ever right to lie to save a life"?

Antinomianism

Antinomianism holds that there are no ethical norms—no standards or patterns which govern or prescribe moral behavior, and

⁵ W. C. Baker, *The Open End of Christian Morals* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) 29.

⁶ See Geisler's two books in n. 3, *Ethics* and *Options*. Our summarizations and analyses of the six approaches are not necessarily those of Geisler, although they are similar to his.

by which moral correctness may be measured.⁷ Lying, therefore, is neither right nor wrong. What a person does may be personally beneficial or satisfying, or helpful to others, but it cannot be declared morally good or bad. Because the Christian scriptures are replete with prescriptive ethical norms and commands, evangelical believers unanimously reject this approach.

Generalism

Generalism maintains that while there are no universal, absolute norms, there are some ethical norms which are generally valid. In this view, lying is generally wrong, but there may be instances (as in the case of saving lives) when it is the right course of action. The rule that lying is wrong may be broken when a greater good than telling the truth is at stake. Ethical norms, therefore, are not absolute, since there may be exceptions to them.⁸ To this approach the evangelical replies: how can we know when it is right to lie? Who is the authority to determine when a norm may be broken? Because the ethical teachings of the scriptures are presented as absolute, without exception (e.g., Ephesians 4-6; Colossians 3-4), this approach must likewise be rejected.

Situationism

In the view of situationism there is only one absolute, universal norm or principle which is generally (but not necessarily) said to be love. If lying is done "lovingly," as when one lies to save another's life, then it is right. If a person lies for selfish reasons, it is wrong.⁹ While

⁷ A well-known antinomian is F. Nietzsche, who calls Christ an "idiot," and declares that "morality must be shot at" (W. Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* [New York: Viking, 1968] 472, 487, 601).

⁸ Frederick the Great reveals his generalism when he writes that the politician, faced by opportunistic opponents who are out to deceive him, has to resort to corrupt strategies at times in order to survive. According to Frederick, however, politicians should nevertheless "depart as little as possible from the straight and narrow path" (L. Reiners, *Friedrich* [Munich, 1952] 311, as quoted in Thielicke, *Foundations*, 533). A kind of "evangelical generalism" is advocated in L. B. Smedes, *Mere Morality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 242.

⁹ The best known modern advocate of situationism is J. Fletcher, whose *Situation Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) rocked the North American moral scene as few books have. J. A. T. Robinson's *Christian Morals Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) helped pave the way for the acceptance of Fletcher's views. There is some confusion, however, in Fletcher's statement of his position. In *Situation Ethics* Fletcher argued that "the ruling norm of Christian decision is love: nothing else" (p. 69). In a later article, "What's in a Rule?: A Situationist's View" (ed. G. H. Outka and P. Ramsey; *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics* [London: SCM, 1968] 335), he wrote that "situationists will not and cannot absolutize *any* kind of laws or rules—natural,

evangelical Christians agree heartily that all ethics can be summarized in the command to love God and neighbor supremely, we also contend that the *content* of Christian love is to be found in the numerous absolute moral norms of the scriptures, specifically in the NT. "Love," without specific content, is at worst merely a subjective impression or impulse at the moment of decision, and at best is a utilitarian guideline in which the end justifies the means. The biblical Christian must reject situationism because it places a vague principle of "love" (or some other principle, such as "free choice" or "response to divine actions") over against and superior to clearly revealed specific ethical norms, such as the commands for truth-telling and marital fidelity. Among most evangelicals, then, antinomianism, generalism, and situationism are unacceptable as ethical approaches to moral decision-making.

Non-conflicting Absolutism

There are three systems that are more acceptable to evangelical Christians. These are (1) non-conflicting absolutism (also referred to by some as unqualified absolutism, or the third-alternative view), (2) ideal absolutism (also designated conflicting absolutism or the lesser-evil view), and (3) hierarchicalism (also known as graded absolutism or the greater-good view). These may be conveniently abbreviated as NCA, IA, and H. Practically all evangelical Christians, after being exposed to these three systems of ethics, would place themselves in one of these categories.¹⁰

As we have stated above, NCA—probably the most common position among traditional absolutists who have thought carefully about the alternatives—maintains that there are many absolute moral

scriptural, or positive (whether ecclesiastical or civil)." However, in the same article, Fletcher spoke of love as the "Summary of the Law," and as a formal principle that alone is "an absolute and universally valid imperative" (p. 334, 335, 337). Fletcher's resolution of this dilemma appears to be in his assertion that love is only a *formal* principle, "without content" ("What's in a Rule?" p. 337). Other fundamental principles of morality suggested by situationism, rather than love, include free choice, obedience to the divine will, and response to divine actions (see J. F. Childress, "Situation Ethics," *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* [ed. J. F. Childress and J. Macquarrie; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986] 586-88).

¹⁰ The three positions may be seen in "Biomedical Decision Making: The Blessings and Curses of Modern Technology," a Christianity Today Institute supplement edited by K. S. Kantzer, Dean of CTI (*Christianity Today*, March 21, 1986, pp. 1-16). In general, P. Brand represents NCA, M. Erickson H, and H. Tiefel IA. The three views are also discussed in W. F. Luck, "Moral Conflicts and Evangelical Ethics: A Second Look at the Salvaging Operations," *Grace Theological Journal* 8 (Spring 1987) 19-34. Luck critiques both H and IA from the standpoint of NCA.

norms, and that these norms never really conflict. God's absolutes are truly absolute; they admit of no exceptions. What appears to be a conflict between two moral absolutes is just that—an apparent conflict. God never places a person in a situation where two divine requirements actually clash. It is always wrong to lie, even if it appears that lying might save someone's life. However, this view recognizes fully the frequent dilemmas of moral decision-making, and seeks to define quite precisely the nature of the divine absolutes which do at times appear to conflict. This position will be dealt with at length throughout the essay.

Ideal Absolutism

Ideal absolutism, or the lesser-evil view, also holds to many absolute, universal norms, yet contends that these norms do sometimes come into real conflict. Ideally—that is, apart from sin—divine moral norms do not conflict, but because of the extensive and intensive nature of sin in this world, there are actual conflicts between God's absolutes. A violation of any of these norms is always wrong and therefore sinful, and when two norms conflict the way out is to choose the lesser of two evils. Thus when the norms of truth-telling and lifesaving come into actual conflict, we must commit the lesser sin (in this case tell a lie) and then confess it.¹¹ For a number of reasons IA does not appear to be acceptable. To hold that God has given his children (in their fallen state) ethical absolutes which genuinely conflict, yet each of which in itself requires obedience, leaves no other conclusion than to view God's grace as insufficient in some cases to overcome evil. Whatever choice one makes, he or she must sin. Furthermore, to say that God's will is for us to choose the lesser evil is to say that we are morally obligated to sin, a notion which is self-contradictory and highly offensive to many Christians.¹² This view, therefore, appears quite unsatisfactory, although many who hold this

¹¹ Those advocating IA, at least in some form, include Thieliicke, *Foundations*, 482–667; Carnell, *Christian Commitment*, 223–30; E. W. Lutzer, *The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics* (Chicago: Moody, 1972) 96–113 (but Lutzer has since moved away from IA, as seen in his *The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Dallas: Probe Ministries, 1981] 88–91); J. W. Montgomery, in J. Fletcher and J. W. Montgomery, *Situation Ethics* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1972) 47–53, 68–70; J. I. Packer, “Situations and Principles,” (ed. B. Kaye and C. Wenham; *Law, Morality, and the Bible* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978] 164–65). A. Bustanoby, *But I Didn't Want a Divorce* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 141–44, seems to come close to IA, but his position is not entirely clear.

¹² J. Fletcher succeeds in exposing this fatal flaw within IA in his debate with J. W. Montgomery, in their *Situation Ethics*, 68–70.

view are outstanding Christians and are totally committed to upholding God's righteous moral standards.¹³

Hierarchicalism

The third alternative among evangelicals is hierarchicalism. This position—like NCA and IA—insists that there are many ethical absolutes derived from the moral teachings of scripture. Like IA, this position holds that God's absolutes do at times genuinely conflict. Unlike the lesser-evil view, however, H teaches that when absolutes conflict we do not choose the lesser evil but rather choose the greater good. Thus it is correct to lie in order to save lives, but this is not an evil. It is a positive good, and does not need to be confessed as sin. While love is the only ultimate ethical norm, love has *many* relationships, and each of these is binding in its context. This position

implies a pyramid of normative values which *in and of themselves* are objectively binding on men. But when any two or more of these values happen to conflict, a person is exempted from his otherwise binding obligation to a lower norm in view of the pre-emptory obligation of the higher norm.¹⁴

While H is a rigorous and reverent attempt to deal with the problem of moral conflicts—either real or apparent—it too is unsatisfactory. One of the most serious objections to this view is its teaching that some of God's absolutes at times need to be transcended (and therefore not followed), which appears to erode their status as absolutes. Hierarchicalists recognize the seriousness of this objection and therefore insist that H does not allow *exceptions* to God's moral absolutes (for we would then have generalism), but rather *exemptions*. Like IA, H seeks to hold on to the truth dear to the heart of biblical Christians that God's moral order is built upon ethical absolutes, which by definition allow for no exceptions. IA deals with the problem of conflicts by affirming that *ideally* God's absolutes do not conflict; they only conflict in a sinful world. H similarly seeks to retain the absolute status of ethical norms, but places them in a hierarchy.

¹³ Helpful refutations of IA are in Geisler, *Ethics*, 109–12; Geisler, *Options*, 70–80; Luck, "Moral Conflicts," 27–30, 34.

¹⁴ Geisler, *Ethics*, 114. This book contains the most significant case for hierarchicalism in recent years (see esp. pp. 114–36). Other major presentations by Geisler of his position are in *Options* (esp. pp. 81–101); *The Christian Ethic of Love* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," *BSac* 131 (July 1974) 219–28; "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," *The Trinity Journal* 4 (Spring 1975) 82–87; "Conflicting Absolutism," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society* 2 (1979) 1–7; and (with P. Feinberg) in *Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 411–27.

While this position appears to be gaining some degree of acceptance among a number of evangelical ethicists,¹⁵ the difficulty of determining the precise hierarchical structure, the setting aside of biblical absolutes, and the sometimes alarming conclusions reached appear to make this system more problematic than helpful.¹⁶

In view of the formidable weaknesses within IA and H we need to look elsewhere for a means of dealing with ethical conflict situations. In the judgment of many, NCA is the most acceptable alternative. We have already highlighted some of the basic points of NCA, but it is now necessary to explain the system in depth. We will first outline its major features and tenets. Then we will present the chief arguments for this system. Finally we will consider some of the main objections to the position.

III. Major Tenets of Non-Conflicting Absolutism¹⁷

Many Divine Absolutes

NCA builds its entire structure upon the foundational principle that there are numerous ethical absolutes given by God. These are moral norms and standards, such as "speak the truth," "do not

¹⁵ See, e.g., Erickson, *Relativism*, 139-53; W. K. Frankena, *Ethics* (2nd ed.; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973) 55-56; S. C. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University, 1982) 155-59; J. J. Davis, *Evangelical Ethics* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985) 12-16.

¹⁶ Geisler's position has been argued against by Lutzer (*Morality Gap*, 96-113). Geisler's response, in the form of a review of Lutzer's book, is in *JETS* 16 (Spring 1973) 97-101. Also opposed to Geisler's view is C. G. Olson, "Norman Geisler's Hierarchical Ethics Revisited," *Evangelical Journal* 4 (Spring 1986) 3-14, with Geisler's reply, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," *Evangelical Journal* 4 (Fall 1986) 82-87. We should point out that Geisler no longer holds to some of the conclusions in his *Ethics*. While his overall system has not changed, his approach to some issues has. On abortion, for example, he has become much more conservative, as seen in "Sanctity of Human Life," and in "The Bible, Abortion and Common Sense," *Fundamentalist Journal* (May 1985) 24-27.

¹⁷ It is very difficult to find a clear, systematic, evangelical presentation of NCA by an advocate of the position. NCA is most often assumed rather than argued. It is this difficulty which prompted the writing of this article. Geisler presents (but then argues against) NCA in *Ethics*, 79-95, and *Options*, 43-65. Those who may be identified in general (but definitely not in every respect) as advocates of NCA include Plato, *Republic*; I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and "On the Supposed Right to Tell Lies From Benevolent Motives"; Augustine, *On Lying and Against Lying*; J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 123-48; and Luck, "Moral Conflicts." We do not wish our position as advocated in this article to be equated precisely with that of any one of these thinkers (thus many of Geisler's objections, e.g., those against Augustine [*Options*, 54-59], do not apply to our statement of NCA), although we are quite close to the views of Murray and Luck.

murder,” “enjoy sex only with your spouse,” which admit of no exceptions or exemptions, and are binding upon all people at all times. These absolutes are derived from the Hebrew-Christian scriptures after careful exegesis and interpretation. Some (such as the prohibition against adultery) are so specific that there are few difficulties in their application, whereas others (such as the command to be merciful) are more general and are sometimes quite difficult to apply. But NCA insists that these absolutes are given by God, are based (directly or indirectly) upon scriptural revelation, and are able to be discerned through reverent and objective study.

One Supreme Absolute

All moral absolutes are extensions of the one all-encompassing absolute: love for God with all one's being and love for neighbor as oneself (Matt 22:34–40). This norm of love is to pervade and motivate all that Christians do.

Some may ask, however, since Jesus spoke of love for God as the first commandment and love for neighbor as the second, do we not have here a hierarchy of ethical norms? While there is a priority indicated by the numbering of these two great commandments, rather than giving us a hierarchy in which some absolute norms conflict with and transcend other absolute norms, Jesus is emphasizing that our love for God is to be the supreme motivating factor and controlling influence in all that we do. When we seek to love God supremely we desire automatically to love our neighbor, because this is commanded by the God we love above all else (John 14:15). However, our concern for our neighbor is never to be actualized at the expense of loving God. In all of our service to people, love for God and obedience to his revealed truth must be kept paramount, otherwise our “love” for others can easily degenerate into sentimentality, carnality, and avoidance of responsibility. Neighbor-love is best defined as that virtue of mind, emotions, and will which seeks another person's highest good, according to scriptural standards.

Non-conflicting Absolutes

Divinely-given moral absolutes never truly conflict, although there are occasions when they appear to conflict. NCA holds that there will never be a situation in which obedience to one absolute will entail disobedience to or the setting-aside of another absolute. If a friend's life will almost certainly be taken by a gun-waving maniac unless I lie concerning my friend's whereabouts, whatever else I do I must not lie. The command to speak truthfully (Eph 4:15) is an absolute that must not be violated. Nothing else I may do or should

do to protect my friend is any more clear than my obligation to be truthful. I *am* obligated to protect the friend, because of God's absolute to love my neighbor as myself, but I am to do it without lying. NCA holds that all relevant absolutes can and must be followed in situations of apparent conflict.

Careful Definition of Absolutes

Non-conflicting absolutists pay close attention to the definition and scriptural basis of each moral absolute. To suggest that NCA can be termed "unqualified absolutism"¹⁸ is not really accurate, because NCA does recognize qualifications and even exceptions, but these are always *within the absolute itself!* They are *part of* the absolute and are therefore *not exceptions* to the absolute (in which case they would be *external to* the absolute).¹⁹ For example, the command for children to obey parents is a moral absolute. It is not a general guideline or a cultural norm. However, within the absolute is the qualification that such obedience is to be given only if parental commands are consistent with the teachings of scripture. Admittedly young children usually do not know scripture well enough to evaluate every parental order, and therefore will generally obey their parents implicitly. But if a child knows that it is wrong to lie or steal, yet is told to do so, the child should disobey. Such disobedience is not an exception or exemption to the norm of obedience to parents, however, because the absolute is to "obey parents except when they command that which is known to be contrary to God's revealed truth." An exception or qualification built into the absolute itself is not an exception to the absolute (for then it could no longer qualify as an absolute), but is an integral part of the absolute.

In this regard, it is helpful to recognize two categories or kinds (not "levels") of absolutes with regard to the locus of authority. Some absolutes require obedience directly to God, without human intermediaries, while other absolutes involve obedience to human beings whose authority has been delegated to them by God. Examples of the first category include prohibitions against lying, murder, adultery, and the commands to be patient and kind to others. The second category includes such matters as obedience to parents, governmental officials,

¹⁸ As Geisler does in *Options*.

¹⁹ Geisler, who appears (rightly, we believe) to use the terms "universal" and "absolute" identically (in contrast to Smedes, *Mere Morality*, 252 n. 24), writes that "since a definable exception is really no exception at all but really part of the definition of what kind of act is being prescribed, a universal norm really has no exceptions at all" (*Ethics* 23).

and local church leaders. Moral dilemmas often arise when an absolute from one category appears to clash with an absolute from the other category. When a child is told by her father to lie on the telephone, or, far worse, to submit to his advances, the resulting sense of conflict can be intense. In such cases the human authority must be disobeyed, but this is not an exception or an exemption to an absolute, for the absolute is defined in such a way that obedience is to be rendered only when human commands do not violate clear scriptural prohibitions and instructions.

At this point we should define carefully one highly controversial moral absolute that has been referred to a number of times above: the norm of truth-telling. The Bible clearly instructs us to speak the truth and not to lie (Exod 20:16; Ps 15:2-4; Prov 6:16-19; 16:13; Zech 8:16-17; 19b; Eph 4:14-15, 25). The difficulty arises when we seek to define "truth" and "lie." In the broadest sense, "truthfulness is the proper use before God of his gift of speech."²⁰ In its more specific ethical meaning, truthfulness is defined as speaking that which is in itself correct (i.e., accurate, corresponding to reality) when this is done in love (Eph 4:15). We agree with R. Preston that

we are not called upon to utter the whole truth at all times and to all and sundry. There are truths better left unsaid; not to speak is not necessarily to sin against the truth, or on occasion part of the truth may be better withheld. Only those who are devoted to the truth will have the sensitivity to discern when and how much of the truth to speak. Otherwise we become sly.²¹

Such a position may seem out of place in the severe, authoritarian waters of NCA, yet it is consistent with everything that has been presented above. The Bible does not explicitly define "truth" and "lie," but it does give enough guidance so that Christians can understand what is and is not required. A half-truth is not necessarily a lie, for God himself instructed Samuel to tell a half-truth with regard to the anointing of David as the future king of Israel (I Sam 16:1-13). Samuel's primary purpose for going to Bethlehem was to anoint the son of Jesse to be king, yet God told Samuel to give a secondary reason—to offer sacrifice—if Saul's men questioned him. Samuel was not to reveal the whole truth, but what he said was "true" in itself, and therefore did not involve a lie.²² Much of the time when Jesus was

²⁰ R. Preston, "Truthfulness," *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (ed. J. F. Childress and J. Macquarrie; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 633.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 139-40. In this work Murray has an excellent discussion of truthfulness from the NCA position (pp. 123-48). He discusses not only

questioned he did not answer as directly or fully as he might have, but what he said was always correct in itself (e.g., Mark 11:27-33; John 2:18-21; 13:36-38; 18:19-24). While it is notoriously difficult to define, a lie would seem to be best defined as speaking words which are untrue (not corresponding to reality), when you know they are untrue, with the intention of deceiving someone.²³

Consideration of this whole matter is fraught with difficulty, and is likely to lead to sin in our speech unless we seek to uphold scrupulously the highest standards of morality. There are times when half-truths *are* evil (e.g., Genesis 20), and every Christian needs to be on guard against the deceitfulness of sin in this area.

No Liability for Negative Results

The person who obeys a clear ethical absolute in a situation of apparent conflict is not morally accountable for whatever evil may be done by others in response to such obedience. If, by my refusal to lie to a madman about the location of an innocent person, that person is murdered, I am not guilty of sin and am not responsible for the murder. I ought to do all that is within the limits of God's law to save the person (including speaking half-truths or unrelated truths if these might help), but if a lie would seem most likely to save the person, yet I refuse to lie and the person is murdered, I have done no wrong. E. Lutzer has keenly observed:

The Christian believes that his responsibility is obedience and that the consequences of moral action are then in the hands of God. If refusing to

the case of Samuel's visit to Bethlehem, but also the cases of Rahab, (Josh 2:4-6), the Hebrew midwives (Exod 1:18-19), Elisha's statement at Dothan (2 Kgs 6:1-19), and Joshua's strategy at Ai (Josh 8:1-8). We much prefer Murray's treatment of truthfulness to that of C. Hodge (*Systematic Theology* [3 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979 reprint] 3.437-44). Hodge (e.g., p. 442) actually comes closer to H than to NCA; he is cited by Geisler as a proponent of "modified" NCA (*Options*, 52, 60).

²³ All three parts of the definition need to be realized before the words can be called a lie. Untrue words themselves are not necessarily a lie (e.g., you say, "John is at work" when he is not, because his friend told you he was at work). Even if you know the words are untrue, you may say them without lying (e.g., the words of an actor in a play). Only when you knowingly speak untrue words for the purpose of deceiving someone are you guilty of lying. Some would add another requirement in order for there to be a lie: "when we are expected and bound to speak the truth" (Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3.443), but we reply that *whenever* a Christian speaks to communicate information (and not as an actor) one must *always* speak what one believes to be truth. One of the most significant modern treatments of lying is S. Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Random House, 1978). A related work by S. Bok is *Secrets: One the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Random House, 1983).

commit adultery or even telling the truth (if there are no scriptural alternatives) causes others to die, this also is within the providence of God. Surely the God of the Scriptures is not one whose plans for certain individuals are frustrated because someone told the truth.²⁴

Advocates of NCA realize how harsh, unfeeling, simplistic, and naive their position sometimes appears to be, yet we maintain that God is most honored and people are most loved when we follow God's moral absolutes. We do not claim infallibility for every ethical decision, but we are persuaded of the soundness of this basic system as opposed to the alternatives. (More will be said on this point under the section on objections.)

Deontological Orientation

NCA is primarily and essentially deontological rather than teleological. Deontological ethics stresses that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined ultimately by an established, obligatory standard of conduct, whereas teleological ethics considers the rightness or wrongness of an action to be determined ultimately by the anticipated consequences of the action. NCA stresses duties rather than results. We follow a given norm first of all because it is good in itself to do so, not primarily because it appears that it will produce good effects. This is not to say that NCA is unconcerned with results and ends, or that we value some abstract rule or principle above the lives and real concerns of human beings, but that the moral guidelines of the living God, when followed fully and consistently, will produce the greatest good for those following them. NCA is concerned with results, but never at the cost of disregarding God's absolutes. The end never justifies the means.²⁵

Consideration of Double Effect

There are times when the principle of double effect, used judiciously, can be helpful in the application of moral absolutes. This

²⁴ Lutzer, *Morality Gap*, 110.

²⁵ While IA and H deny that they are teleological systems of ethics, and while we agree that they are not essentially and primarily teleological (at least not in their evangelical form), we see a strong teleological influence in their actual outworking. Geisler, for example, discusses (*Ethics*, 123-24; *Ethic of Love*, 106) the case of the overcrowded lifeboat, and states that if no one volunteers to leave, and if after a vote is taken the losers still refuse to jump off, then the one in charge is responsible to do whatever is necessary (even forcing the extra persons from the lifeboat) to save as many lives as possible. But is this not teleology and utilitarianism at work? Is this not looking more at anticipated consequences than at deontological absolutes? How can one be certain that seven people in a lifeboat made for five could not survive until rescued? See Lutzer, *Morality Gap*, 104 n, and Geisler's reply in *Options*, 97.

centuries-old principle teaches that in cases of ethical conflict where it appears that a given action will produce two effects, one desirable and one undesirable, it may be permissible to perform the action as long as the undesirable effect is not directly intended. Such matters as wounding or killing a person in self-defense and surgery to save the life of an expectant mother, when the fetus will surely die as a result of the surgery, are typical cases in which the principle of double effect *may* be applicable.

Especially since the 19th century, actions involving evil (i.e., undesirable but not sinful) consequences have been said to be justifiable if they meet four conditions. (1) The action from which evil will result must be morally good (or at least indifferent) in itself. (2) The intention or motive prompting the action must be upright, and must be directed toward the good effect, not the evil. (3) The good effect must precede or at least be simultaneous with the evil effect. (4) The good effect must be at least equivalent to the evil effect (i.e., there must be a proportionately serious reason for allowing the evil to happen).²⁶

While NCA does not necessarily endorse every detail of the principle of double effect, and surely does not approve of the enormous casuistry concerning the double effect that has developed over the centuries to justify moral evil (e.g., spreading the Christian gospel by the sword), we do recognize that there is some validity to the principle in general. When the Israelites conquered the promised land there were some occasions when, *at God's command*, young children were slain (Deut 20:16-18; Josh 6:21; 8:2, 24-27; 11:6-20). This, of course, was an undesirable—even horrible—effect which resulted from an action that was in itself right: the destruction of a society so enmeshed in idolatry that it was irredeemable (Deut 20:16-18). If we assume that God's people who engaged in such actions were living in trustful obedience to him, we believe that such actions were not sinful. The terrible carnage occurred as the result of the sinful condition of humanity, but the devout Israelite soldier was not guilty of sin. While none today can claim God's mandate to destroy any nation, we can learn from God's instructions to Israel that the principle of

²⁶ R. A. McCormick, "Principle of Double Effect," *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (ed. J. F. Childress and J. Macquarrie; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 162-63. See also D. F. Montaldi, "A Defense of St. Thomas and the Principle of Double Effect," *JRE* 14 (Fall 1986) 206-332; B. Schuller, "The Double Effect in Catholic Thought: a Reevaluation," *Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations* (ed. R. McCormick and P. Ramsey; Chicago: Loyola University, 1978) 165-92; S. S. Levy, "Paul Ramsey and the Rule of Double Effect," *JRE* 15 (Spring 1987) 59-71.

double effect, or something much like it, does seem to be divinely approved.

In the case of surgery to save the life of the mother,²⁷ the principle of double effect may be useful. When a Christian woman learns she is expecting a child, and at the same time is told she has a particularly virulent and fast-spreading type of uterine cancer, what should she do? If, after much prayer and counsel, she feels that she should have a hysterectomy (which will, of course, end the life of the fetus), she may be able to do so without calling such action the "lesser of two evils," or an "exemption" from one of God's absolute moral laws. What she may believe she is doing is following God's absolute norm to care for her body, the temple of the Holy Spirit, so that she will be able to serve God and her family most productively during her years on earth. The new life in the womb will die as a result of the surgery, but this was not the intention of the action. In this case, all four conditions listed above regarding the principle of double effect will apply. We are *not* saying that the woman *should* go ahead with the surgery. In such situations each Christian must seek God's direction.²⁸ But if she chooses to follow the above course, we cannot say she is necessarily violating God's moral law.

IV. *Major Arguments for Non-conflicting Absolutism*

It is one thing to present the major tenets of a position; it is another matter to argue for that position. What are the primary reasons for embracing NCA as opposed to some other system of dealing with moral conflicts? While some of these arguments have been either stated briefly or implied already in this paper, it is necessary for a proper understanding of NCA for them to be given systematically.

²⁷ We do not call this action "abortion," since abortion is deliberately intended to end the life of the fetus.

²⁸ The mother may choose in faith to have no surgery until the baby is able to survive outside the womb. While many would regard this as foolish, and certain to doom both mother and child, we present it as a very live option, and (all else being in order) would greatly respect those who reverently adopt this position. Such conflict situations as this, while used frequently to justify abortion, practically never occur in today's modern societies. C. E. Koop, in "A Response to 'Sanctity of Human Life,'" writes from his experience of almost a half-century as a pediatric surgeon: "I, personally, have never known of a situation where an abortion would save the life of a mother at the expense of destroying the baby. Even in most unusual situations, where in pregnancy the mother develops a malignant tumor and the question of abortion arises, the destruction of the unborn child will not affect the eventual outcome of the life of the mother" (*Applying the Scriptures* [ed. K. S. Kantzer; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 170).

Nature of Absolutes

The very definition and nature of absolutes argues for NCA. If, as we believe, an absolute is a universally-binding moral norm or directive which admits of no exceptions or exemptions outside of the absolute itself, then we must maintain that when a conflict situation arises in which specific absolutes are brought to bear upon the decision, whatever else we may do, we cannot disobey, lay aside, or transcend any of these divine absolutes. To say that an absolute is to be followed only within its own context or sphere, as H does,²⁹ is a way of theoretically retaining the absolute status of the moral norm (which all evangelicals know they must do, lest they be accused of generalism). But how does this differ in practice from systems which simply ignore or disobey God's absolutes? In either case we would choose not to follow the absolute in this or that specific conflict situation. The statement that "there are no legitimate exceptions to an ethical absolute, but not all absolutes are absolutely absolute"³⁰ fatally weakens the binding character of God's ethical norms and, in practice, shifts the locus of authority from the divine lawgiver to the moral agent. NCA retains not only the absolute status of each divinely-revealed moral norm "as such,"³¹ but also retains the full operational authority of each absolute in every actual situation involving that absolute.

Character of God

The character of God argues for NCA. If God has given numerous moral absolutes, some of which genuinely conflict at times, it appears that there is conflict within the mind and moral will of God! Why does God not give his children moral absolutes that can, with his help, always be followed? What is there within the mind of God that produces real conflict between two of his perfect laws? Those who follow IA argue that ideally God's absolutes do not conflict, but in this sinful world they sometimes do. Yet, we ask, what does it actually mean to say that "ideally" divine absolutes do not conflict? If they do not conflict ideally, then why should they conflict in practice? Were not God's absolutes (except those commanded before the fall) given to humankind in our sinful condition, as a standard for our lives in real, not ideal, situations? The character of God as perfect and consistent within his own moral nature appears to be jeopardized by any view which holds that God's absolutes genuinely conflict.

²⁹ Geisler, *Ethics*, 130-33; Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 14-16.

³⁰ Geisler, *Ethics*, 132.

³¹ Geisler frequently insists on the universally binding character of absolute norms "as such" (*Ethics*, 130-31).

Another aspect of God's character relates especially to the matter of truth-telling. We agree with Augustine when he argues that because God is "the Truth," no lie can ever be justified.³² The very nature of God and Christ as ultimate Truth (John 1:14; 14:6; 2 John 1-3) seems to clash severely with the view that God's children, who are admonished to walk in truth (Eph 4:15) and are commended for doing so (2 John 4; 3 John 3-4), should at times speak lies (either as the lesser of two evils or as the greater good).

A third area of consideration with respect to God's character has to do with God as a wise, compassionate, and enabling lawgiver. The God who issued his moral law to his people did so with infinite wisdom and understanding of them and their sinful world. His wisdom ensures that the absolutes he has given are to be followed absolutely. He knows what is best for humankind. As a compassionate God he ordained absolutes that would not leave his people in confusion by really conflicting. As a God of power which he imparts to his people, God has given absolutes that can actually be obeyed as we rely upon his grace. The character of God as a wise, compassionate, and powerful lawgiver is called into question by the notion of conflicting absolutes.

Natural Reading of Scripture

The position of NCA is the most natural way to understand the scriptures. When we read that we are forbidden to lie, steal, commit adultery, and are to tell the truth in love, feed the hungry, and love our neighbor as ourselves, we most naturally assume, as finite and dependent children of our wise and trustworthy God, that God means what he says and intends for us to do exactly that. While there are many ethical laws in the Bible which are not absolutes (e.g., the dietary and political laws of ancient Israel), we are speaking here of the basic moral norms which most God-fearing people regard as absolute. Does God want us to lie or steal at times in order to save lives? If so, why does he direct us in such an absolute manner not to lie or steal? The distinct and natural impression from the scriptures (Psalm 119 is an excellent example) is that God's moral directives can be and ought to be followed consistently, without true conflict.

Deficiencies of Other Systems

The considerable deficiencies of both IA and H leave NCA as the most viable alternative among multiple-absolutist positions. Some of

³² A critique of Augustine's rigorous reliance upon God as "the Truth" is by A. Verhey, "The Truth and the Life," *Reformed Journal* 37 (April 1987) 11-15.

these weaknesses have been referred to above, and bibliographical assistance has been given there to materials which attempt to refute IA and H. If, as we believe, both of these systems are laden with difficulties too great to tolerate, what alternative is there but NCA? Put another way, the very fact that it is so difficult to find any writer who has argued from a biblical and evangelical perspective, in a sustained and systematic manner, for the NCA position as a whole, may very well be because NCA is the viewpoint which most naturally commends itself to most Christians, and is simply assumed by them. This, of course, does not make NCA correct, but it may suggest that the burden of proof is upon the advocates of IA and H to present and defend their systems in a manner acceptable to the majority of evangelical Christians.

V. *Chief Objections to Non-conflicting Absolutism*

For at least two reasons we need to consider the major criticisms of NCA. First, if these objections are valid we need to abandon NCA in favor of some more acceptable system of dealing with moral conflicts. Second, by considering objections we have the opportunity to further clarify, explain, and argue our position. Although no one has stated the major criticisms precisely in this manner, we can say that there are at least five: NCA is unrealistic, unbiblical, inflexible, inconsistent, and invalid.

Unrealistic

NCA is thought to be unrealistic. A colleague of mine, an advocate of IA, once remarked that my system is unrealistic, H is too realistic, and IA is realistic. Other ways of registering the broad objection are to say that NCA is incredibly naive, unsophisticated, doesn't square with real life, and fails to show how moral absolutes actually interrelate. One critic, for example, states: "Like many other idealistic positions, non-conflicting pluralistic absolutism is a beautiful theory which is destroyed by a brutal gang of facts."³³

In response, we agree that the realities of life are often harsh and brutal. We strongly disavow any simplistic acceptance of absolutes for their own sake which fails to define those absolutes carefully and scripturally, and which fails to demonstrate how these absolutes operate in conflict situations. We maintain that NCA can be shown to be very realistic and workable.

³³ Geisler, *Ethics*, 94. See also Geisler and Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 415-16.

An example, given here at some length, may be helpful. Suppose a Christian husband comes home late at night, enters his home quietly, and sees down the hallway an intruder, gun in hand, moving toward the bedroom where his wife is sleeping. The husband, unnoticed by the intruder, instinctively grabs his gun kept hidden near the door. What does he do? Do we not have here a genuine conflict of two divine absolutes: to love one's enemy (even "turn the other cheek"), and to love, protect, and care for one's wife lest he be "worse than an infidel"? Some would say that here is a case of true conflict of absolutes, and that it is possible to follow only one. NCA, while admitting the very real sense of conflict within the husband, contends that the two absolutes are not in genuine conflict in such a way that one of them must be disobeyed or transcended. Both absolutes are in full force in this situation, and both must be obeyed.

What does NCA say should be done? Surely the husband must act at once. While we in no way want to belittle those who would say to pray only, or to rebuke the intruder in Jesus' name, or to follow some other nonviolent approach to the situation, we will dismiss these solutions at present because they *appear* to be even more naive and unrealistic than our suggested approach.³⁴ We hold that *both* the man's wife *and* the intruder are neighbors who are to be loved as oneself. To do nothing to stop the man would be unloving *both* to the wife *and* to the intruder. The wife would most likely be raped or killed or both; the intruder, if not stopped, would bring even greater judgment from God upon himself for the rape, murder, or other crimes which he is about to commit. The man must be stopped immediately.

In our view the husband may shoot the man (or assault him with some other weapon if he has no gun) without violating any moral absolute. But—and here is a key point—he ought not to shoot to kill. If he shoots with the intention of killing, and succeeds, he has cut the man off forever from responding to God's grace, and, most likely, the man will be lost. Neighbor love contends that if I am a non-Christian intruder, about to commit such a crime, yet have not fully and finally rejected the offers of the gospel which I have heard, I would (in my more rational and solemn moments) want the husband to stop me, by force if necessary, but not end my life. Neighbor love seeks the other's highest good, and for the intruder that is to see him converted to Christ. It appears that the best solution would be to shoot at some

³⁴ We have great respect for those who advocate such solutions, and highly recommend, as a rationale for nonviolence, J. H. Yoder, *What Would You Do?* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1983). Yoder and others deal with actual cases and their outcomes.

part of the man's body where a wound would not likely be fatal. The husband could aim for the legs, or, if he was a good shot, for the hand or gun, and then immediately seek cover. Or he may aim for the man's torso and intend to injure him only enough to stop him. If the intruder is killed, the husband ought not to feel guilty of sin, although he would and should be terribly saddened. The intention was not to kill the intruder but to help him, by preventing worse sin on his part and also by keeping him alive to respond to the gospel. Even if the husband did intend to kill the intruder, some who hold to NCA may argue that this is still not wrong, because the husband was acting in self-defense as an accepted agent of the state, which does have the power of the sword (Rom 13:4). After all, civil authorities consistently recognize the legitimacy of such self-defensive actions, even if they result in death. My personal view, however, is to intervene in such a way that killing is not intended. Only in this manner does it seem that neighbor love will be practiced.

Another aspect of this case, referred to already indirectly, pertains to the defining of the absolutes in the first place. To "love one's neighbor/enemy" is indeed a moral absolute, but the absolute mandates that we seek the intruder's highest good, which is for him to be stopped from further sin and to be saved eternally. In addition, the absolute regarding love and protection of one's *wife* is fully obeyed with the proposed solution. The intruder will most assuredly turn away from the bedroom and turn either toward the husband or toward a way of escape. It is very possible that the intruder will move toward the husband, and, if the intruder still has a gun, seek to kill the husband. For this reason some would say the husband ought to shoot to kill in the first place. Only in this way will the wife really be loved and protected, because she may otherwise lose not only her protector and provider, but her own life also as the intruder returns to end her life. While this is a possible scenario, it is an unlikely one if the intruder is injured in such a way that the pain causes him to drop the gun and/or turn toward his own rescue. We allow that the intruder must be stopped firmly. Throwing a vase at him probably won't suffice, unless that is all one has. Even then, however, the intruder would be distracted and almost certainly turn toward the husband, who can then run out the door shouting so as to cause the intruder either to follow him or escape before the neighbors come.

What is often overlooked in cases of this sort is that no one can know with certainty what the outcome will be following any action. Those who say the husband should shoot to kill are assuming that this will solve the problem; the intruder will surely be stopped. What they sometimes fail to realize is that this does not always work. At times

one's aim is poor and the intruder shoots and kills even the one who shot to kill him. The "brutal fact" is that in cases of violence, nothing is guaranteed. A Christian needs to determine ahead of time, as much as possible, the course of action he would take in this or that predicament, and then follow it with total reliance upon God if the situation ever arises.

Space does not allow us to deal with further examples of how NCA avoids the charge of being naive and unrealistic, but we have thought long and hard about numerous conflict situations, and we know of no case for which NCA is not able to provide a satisfactory solution. We do not say that answers are necessarily easy to discern, and we surely do not claim to be right at all times, but we believe that there is always a solution to the most difficult case which does not call for the transgressing or transcending of any of God's ethical absolutes. Such solutions, we maintain, are realistic, workable, and faithful to scripture.

Unbiblical

NCA is said to be out of harmony with the scriptures. This objection may be raised in a number of ways. Some, particularly those who hold to IA, argue that NCA does not take seriously enough the biblical teaching on sin. Because sin has so thoroughly infected the human race and the entire world-system (e.g., the structures of human government, international trade, finance, business, and law), it is argued that there will be some occasions when God's absolutes do genuinely conflict, and any response on our part will necessarily involve sin.³⁵ NCA, it is said, is too optimistic in its view of fallen human nature.

In reply, we agree that human nature and the orders of this world are permeated by sin, not only in easily recognizable "bad" actions and policies but also in extremely subtle and deceptive ways that we often fail to recognize. But we also insist upon two related truths. First, the fact of sin's extensive and intensive presence in the world and in human beings does not in itself prove that God's moral absolutes come into real conflict. If a Christian in the military is told to lie in order to protect some covert operation, he can (and ought to)

³⁵ Thielicke (*Foundations*, 499) writes: "Reformation ethics perceives that not merely individual acts, but even the laws and orders of this aeon, within which they are performed, are infected by sin." H. Bavinck similarly notes: "In every deliberation and deed of the believer . . . the good and the evil lie, as it were, mingled through each other" (*Our Reasonable Faith* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956] 495). A. A. Hoekema expresses his agreement with Bavinck in M. E. Dieter, et al., *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 188.

refuse. Why must we assume that he *has* to sin in one way or another? He would be disobeying his government, but this is not sin because he has no obligation before God to obey any human authority in matters which violate God's moral absolutes. Second, God's grace is greater than sin. Those who emphasize the radical and pervasive nature of sin often fail to stress the grace of God to his children which can enable them to live victoriously over sin. They do stress grace as "unmerited favor" which grants forgiveness when we fall, but often do not emphasize grace as the power of the indwelling Christ through the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 12:9-10; Heb 4:16). Any ethical system which leaves the Christian in a position of *having* to sin is a system which does not understand the defeat of sin's power by the cross of Christ, in *this* life as well as in the eschaton, and does not fully comprehend the present power of grace.

Another way in which the objection is raised that NCA is unbiblical has to do with certain incidents in the Bible where two absolutes appear to conflict. Critics contend that NCA does not offer satisfactory explanations of these incidents. For example, were not the Hebrew midwives (Exod 1:15-22) faced with a genuine conflict of absolutes when they had to sacrifice either truth or the lives of many Hebrew infants? Did not God commend the midwives for their "righteous" lies?

Let us examine the story. First of all, the midwives clearly did right by refusing to kill the boy babies. Second, the midwives were not necessarily wrong in seeking to evade Pharaoh's question, "Why have you let the boys live?" As we have seen above, nothing in the biblical absolute of truth-telling requires that we say all that can be said in answer to the questions of hostile persons. As mentioned, Jesus frequently avoided giving direct answers to his antagonists' questions, either by refusing to answer, by asking a question, or by saying that which was in itself true, yet which did not reveal the desired information. Third, what the midwives said (v 19) may very well have been true in itself. The Hebrew mothers were undoubtedly lively and vigorous (from the Hebrew verb "to live") in both body and spirit. They apparently did give birth before the midwives arrived, but this seems to have been because of a prearranged plan. The mothers desired to spare the midwives the results of disobedience to the king. It would appear that the midwives assisted the expectant mothers up to the time of birth, and then, after giving last-minute instructions, left the room during the birth itself (possibly other expectant mothers were trained to help in the deliveries).

We admit that the midwives intended to deceive Pharaoh with their answer, but we have seen above how God himself instructed

Samuel to deceive Saul about the anointing of David. Deception is not always a form of lying, for built into the norm of truth-telling is the understanding, based upon scripture, that God's people need not always give direct answers to those whose intentions are against God and his purposes. Even if we allow that the midwives sinned by lying to the king, we do not grant that such lying was in any sense the proper or necessary thing to do, or that God commended the midwives *because* they lied. It is said twice that the midwives "feared God" (vv 17, 21), and this is why God was favorable to them and pleased with their refusal to murder the children. We acknowledge that the text can give the impression, *prima facie*, that the midwives lied and that God approved of the lie, but upon closer examination we believe that the women did not lie. In any case, the incident may be satisfactorily explained from the viewpoint of NCA, and that with fewer difficulties than with the IA or H positions.

Other biblical cases sometimes used to argue against NCA include Rahab's lie to protect the spies (Joshua 2, 6), Abraham's offering of Isaac (Genesis 22), and Jesus' choice of obeying his heavenly Father or his earthly parents (Luke 2). While we admit that some of these cases are difficult, we maintain that there are acceptable explanations within the NCA position.

Inflexible

Is NCA inflexible? It seems to some that NCA elevates an impersonal, inflexible, uncompassionate, and legalistic principle of authority and law over the lives and concerns of real people. It is said that our view "often tends to legalism by neglecting the spirit of the law in order to avoid breaking the letter of the law."³⁶ If telling a "white lie" (as Thielicke calls them³⁷) will save another person's life, how can NCA be so unmerciful as to insist on absolute truth in every situation?

We deny vigorously that NCA regards an impersonal principle of law to be superior to human lives. We are as concerned to be merciful as either IA or H, but we believe that we are most merciful to people when we follow God's absolute moral guidelines revealed in the scriptures, without any attempt to disobey or transcend them. God gave his ethical directives to help us, not to put us in bondage to an austere and impersonal system of law. What advocates of IA and H

³⁶ Geisler, *Options*, 64.

³⁷ Thielicke (*Foundations*, 529-66) devotes 37 pages to the "white lie." Bok (*Lying*, 60-76) also treats the topic.

sometimes fail to realize is that by setting aside one of God's absolutes we are not necessarily doing the more merciful thing. As it actually happens, telling the white lie is sometimes *less* merciful than not telling it. A lie will not necessarily save a life or help the situation. Apart from the fact that it is sinful, it often leads to terrible hurt and confusion in the one to whom or about whom it was told, as well as in the one telling the lie.

What about keeping a vow made to God in a moment of haste and indiscretion? Doesn't the Bible teach, in the view of NCA, that once a vow has been made to God it should never be broken (Eccl 5:1-7)? Isn't it unmerciful and legalistic to insist that the vow be kept? We reply that the absolute to always keep one's vow to God has within it the understanding that one should only keep vows that are consistent with God's revealed truth (Mark 7:9-13). If I vow that I will give \$12,000 to foreign missions during the next year, when the maximum projected income for our family of five will be \$24,000, such would be a foolish vow. I believe I ought to acknowledge the vow as wrong (Prov 20:25) and not compound the wrong by seeking to fulfill it, if there is no way I can do so without taking the money from my family's basic living costs. NCA always seeks to ascertain exactly what a moral absolute does and does not require, and when one has gotten into a dilemma by a previous sin or foolish action, he or she is not to sin further by a slavish adherence to an absolute God never issued.

NCA is surely not merciless. Corrie Ten Boom hid many Jews from the Nazis during the terrible holocaust years, yet she seldom, if ever, told a lie to protect the Jews. What she said to the enemy was true in itself, but she did not always say the whole truth. It was *because of* her great compassion for people in distress that she did what she did. Adherents of NCA seek to be *both* compassionate *and* uncompromising in the outworking of God's moral absolutes.

Inconsistent ↘

NCA is considered to be inconsistent. It is argued that we who insist so firmly on the non-conflicting status of moral absolutes are often inconsistent in the everyday matters of life. One advocate of IA presents the problem as he sees it (although he is not here arguing directly against NCA):

Whenever I try to observe the canons of common etiquette I find myself uttering a constant stream of untruths. By the agreement of common convention I begin a letter courteously with the polite salutation "Dear . . . ," even though I actually regard the recipient as a fool. . . .

Indeed I often say “Goodbye,” a shortened form of “God be with you,” when what I really mean is “Go to the devil.”³⁸

A similar example of not really meaning what we say is that of a sexton at whose church theological students often did the preaching. He always had three basic answers when the students asked anxiously how they had done. If they had done well he would reply, “The Lord has been gracious”; if moderately well, “The text was difficult”; and if badly, “The hymns were well chosen.”³⁹ From the position of H we read a further criticism:

Note that most (if not virtually all) unqualified absolutists are inconsistent. They engage in intentional deception of various kinds with self-approval and yet condemn lying to save a life. Most people, for example, leave their lights on while away from the home in order to deceive potential thieves. But if one will lie to save his property from a potential thief, then why not lie to save an innocent life from an actual murderer?⁴⁰

In reply, we admit that many people do speak and act in ways inconsistent with their true feelings. People are often polite outwardly to someone whom they despise inwardly. But such courtesy in itself is not the problem. The wrong is in not loving my neighbor as myself—the hating of a person created in God’s image. If I really do regard the recipient of my letter as a fool, this is not wrong if my understanding of “fool” is according to the description in Proverbs. But I have no justification for thinking toward him, “Go to the devil.” As my situation permits, I am to help him toward deliverance from his path of foolishness and destruction. As for my writing “Dear” and “Goodbye,” I should continue to use them, but I should mean what I say. I am to regard the “fool” as a person whom I love for Christ’s sake, and must truly desire God to be with him. The problem is not with divine absolutes, but with our frequent failure to obey God and believe that what he commands he is also able to perform in us. As for the sexton’s replies to the student preachers, there is no genuine conflict between kindness and truthfulness. We are to “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). It is not really love if we fail to point out weaknesses when we are expected to do so, but we need to manifest great gentleness and encouragement in so doing.

What about leaving our lights or radio on when we are away from home? Even if we admit that this is a form of deception, all deception is not wrong. God himself commanded Joshua to deceive

³⁸ Thielicke, *Foundations*, 545.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 549.

⁴⁰ Geisler, *Options*, 63.

the people of Ai in order to win the victory (Josh 8:1-29).⁴¹ Deception is not always lying. When I leave my lights on, I am not necessarily saying, "Someone is home in this house." I am not *saying* anything, true or false, but I am seeking to confuse potential burglars. The thief will do as he chooses, but I want to make it as difficult as possible for him to choose to enter my house. When Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" (Luke 8:45) he gave the distinct impression that he didn't know who did it. He did not say that he didn't know, but he allowed a certain amount of confusion within the crowd. Leaving the lights on may create confusion among thieves, but it is not lying. This practice cannot be used to disprove NCA or to justify lying.

Invalid

By NCA's being invalid is meant that the absolutes formulated and followed by NCA are so weakened by the qualifications and exceptions built into them that they no longer have any substance, force, or foundation. They are meaningless moralisms which have died "the death of a thousand qualifications." What kind of an "absolute" do we have remaining after we tack on this restriction and that exception *ad infinitum*? Whenever NCA gets into trouble and appears to be heading for a real conflict of absolutes, it simply needs to think of a quick qualification to add to one of the absolutes. This way we can do just about anything we want, while all the while claiming to adhere to every one of God's laws. The critic of NCA may offer as an example the physician who wants to prescribe a placebo for his suffering patient whose system cannot tolerate more morphine at the time, yet is screaming for something to be done. Here it appears that the absolutes of doing mercy and being truthful will clash. But the NCA doctor, who has decided already that he will give the placebo, needs some way to justify his action. He can conveniently stretch or modify the absolute of truth-telling in some way (in this case by allowing incorrect information to be given to a suffering patient) as long as he says his "exception" is really part of the absolute.

In reply we deny that our absolutes are invalid. We admit that within NCA absolutes are carefully defined, but all specifications and stipulations built into the absolutes have scriptural warrant, and are not devised ad hoc as the need arises. They may be *realized* at the time of an apparent conflict, but they are not *invented* then. Furthermore, qualifications and exceptions (such as "incorrect information may be given to a suffering patient") which negate the very heart of

⁴¹ See the above discussion and n. 22.

the absolute (“never speak what is untrue”) cause the absolute to self-destruct, and are therefore positively harmful to the NCA position. We therefore reject any such casuistical scheming as unworthy of God’s moral character and God’s people.

What about the physician who believes that placebos are sometimes proper? Is he necessarily lying to the patient? While we have some doubts about the wisdom of placebos, we do not believe he is lying if he simply administers the placebo. He is giving a kind of medication that may alleviate the pain. However, if the patient asks what he is receiving, the physician may not speak untruth. He may respond in a general way (“this is something we are using to help with the pain”), but if asked point-blank he must not lie (“This is a saline solution which in some cases seems to have produced good results”). It is generally accepted that, in some cases, placebos do as much good as the commonly used medications. What the doctor is saying is therefore true.⁴² All moral absolutes within NCA which are based upon a careful consideration of scriptural ethics are fully valid, with all the substance and force they were intended to have.

VI. Conclusion

Many Christians have never realized the extent to which apparent conflict situations affect their everyday lives. And many who are aware of the problem in general have never thought through systematically a consistent approach for dealing with the issues. This essay has sought to introduce readers to the matter of apparent conflicts, and to present, argue for, and defend non-conflicting absolutism. NCA is held to be superior to the non-evangelical positions of anti-nomianism, generalism, and situationism, and to the evangelical alternatives of ideal absolutism and hierarchicalism. NCA holds that God’s moral absolutes never truly conflict, and that all of them are binding in any given situation, with the power of God present for their fulfillment. Rather than stating absolutes in their most simple form (“do not kill”), NCA takes pains to state the norms fully, with whatever scriptural qualifications and specifications there may be (“do not intentionally kill a person without the authorization of your government, when that government is attempting to reward good and evil according to their merits,” Rom 13:1-7). Once we understand God’s absolutes, we are to follow them regardless of anticipated consequences. We honor God and help people most when we do what God

⁴² This whole matter of truthfulness in medical care is discussed in Thieliicke, *Foundations*, 551-66; Bok, *Lying*, 232-55; and (from a clear NCA position) in F. E. Payne, Jr., *Biblical/Medical Ethics* (Milford: Mott Media, 1985) 116-21.

has said. No harm that may *follow* our obedience occurs *because of* our obedience. We obey the norms; God takes care of the results.

Arguments for NCA include the very definition and nature of absolutes, the character of God, the overall impression from the scriptures, and the serious weaknesses within both IA and H. To the charges that NCA is unrealistic, unbiblical, inflexible, inconsistent, and invalid, we have responded with arguments and examples that show just the opposite. We have not answered every possible objection, but we believe we have treated the major ones seriously. If NCA is not the best approach to moral conflict situations we desire to abandon it without delay. But the more we study NCA (and its leading evangelical alternatives) the more we are convinced that it is biblical, consistent, and workable.

No ethical system can provide predetermined answers for every situation in life. It is not the purpose of NCA to compile an infallible handbook of problems and solutions. Apart from the fact that such would be impossible, it would be undesirable as well. No person can hope to find in a book what he or she needs to learn from God, sometimes at the very moment of decision.⁴³ There is an existential quality to Christian ethics that brings us face to face with our finiteness and God's infinity, with our ignorance and God's wisdom, with our weakness and God's strength. No system can nor should seek to deliver the believer from the utter dependence upon the Spirit of God that gives life and meaning to ethical decisions. If NCA can be used as a means to this end, we embrace it and urge its acceptance.

⁴³ Thielicke, *Foundations*, 621, 648-67.



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